

'This is what people power looks like'; More than a million took to the streets in youth-led climate strikes

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Body

Government leaders around the world will be hard-pressed to tune out the unprecedented youth-led climate strikes that took place Friday to demand nations take more aggressive action in curbing carbon emissions.

More than a million protesters took to the streets in more than 150 countries as young people urged politicians to take climate change seriously and implement policies aimed at keeping global warming to a maximum of 1.5 C.

The flagship event took place in New York City, where 16-year-old Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg led thousands of young people in a demonstration and march three days before world leaders gather there to attend the United Nations Climate Action Summit on Monday. Thunberg started the "Fridays for Future" movement last August when she began to skip school to protest inaction on climate change in front of the Swedish parliament.

Other protests took place in such cities as Canberra, London, Paris, Berlin, Johannesburg, Nairobi and Kabul.

"This is what people power looks like. We will rise to the challenge. We will hold those who are the most responsible for this crisis accountable, and we will make the world leaders act. We can and we will," Thunberg told demonstrators.

She also had a stark warning for those who oppose the climate action movement: "And if you belong to that small group of people who feel threatened by us, then we have some very bad news for you because this is only the beginning. Change is coming whether they like it or not."

In some regions, children were officially given the day off school to attend the strikes; the New York City public school board gave permission to 1.1 million public school students to skip school to join that city's protest, one of more than 800 events happening in the U.S. alone in all 50 states.

Things were quieter Friday in Canada, which will see most of its major climate strikes take place on Sept. 27 in cities such as Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, where Thunberg will be in attendance. More than 100 events are planned across Canada that day.

There were some modest protests in some parts of the country, however, including in Calgary, where hundreds of activists gathered in front of city hall. In Edmonton, protesters staged a "die-in" protest and march, while in the West Coast, B.C. Premier John Horgan was to meet with climate activists.

In Toronto, several hundred people gathered in front of Hart House at the University of Toronto for a "teach-in," an event in which young people learned strategies for expressing the fears they have and how to talk to adults about the climate crisis.

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Allie Rougeot, co-ordinator of the Toronto Fridays for Future chapter, said she was "very excited and very hopeful" to see such huge crowds take to the streets around the world.

The strikes began in Australia, where organizers estimated more than 300,000 protesters took to the streets in more than 100 cities, including Sydney and the capital Canberra. Demonstrators called for their country, the world's largest exporter of coal and liquid natural gas, to take more drastic action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

"Even though we ourselves aren't sick, the planet which we live on is, and we are protesting and fighting for it," Siobhan Sutton, a 15-year-old student at Perth Modern School, told The Associated Press.

In the U.K., thousands of young people protested in cities big and small, including Cardiff, Manchester, Glasgow and London, where about 100,000 participants were estimated to have shown up.

Similarly, an estimated 100,000 people rallied at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate just as German politicians hammered out a new package of plans to limit that country's carbon emissions.

In the Afghan capital, Kabul, an armoured personnel carrier was deployed to protect about 100 young people as they marched, led by a group of several young women carrying a banner emblazoned with "Fridays for Future."

Fardeen Barakzai, one of the organizers and head of the local climate activist group, Oxygen, said "We want to do our part. We as the youth of our country know the problem of climate change. We know war can kill a group of people ... The problem in Afghanistan is our leaders are fighting for power, but the real power is in nature."

Worldwide, more than 2,800 businesses and organizations pledged to join the Not Business As Usual alliance, a group supporting worker participation in the climate strikes. In North America, about 1,500 Amazon employees pledged to walk off the job in solidarity with young protesters and to urge the retail giant to do more to fight climate change.

On Thursday, the day before the strikes, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos announced that the company would commit to switching to 100 per cent renewable energy by 2030 and to achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2040.

Thunberg has become the voice of a generation that will be forced to deal with the effects of ever-increasing carbon emissions and temperatures unless drastic measures are taken now. The Earth has already warmed one degree since pre-industrial-era levels and scientists warn that if global temperature increases are not held to 1.5 degrees, we are at greater risk of more life-threatening environmental disasters.

On Wednesday, Thunberg addressed the U.S. Congress imploring lawmakers to "unite behind the science" and "take real action."

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